

Pennsylvania

Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in Schools

Challenge

A 2002 study conducted by the Pennsylvania Department of Health showed that 35% of a large statewide sample of eighth graders were at risk for being overweight or already were overweight. An important way to address this problem is to give children more and better choices in both what they eat and how physically active they are. Because children spend both a considerable and formative part of their lives in school, it is important to create a school environment that supports and encourages nutrition and physical activity. And to ensure lasting changes in behavior, it is important to involve parents and the rest of the community.

Response

Created in 2003 by the state Department of Health and funded by CDC, Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (PANA) is a statewide organization supported by a coalition of more than 500 public, private, academic, professional, and volunteer groups.

In 2005, PANA launched the second year of its annual Keystone Healthy Zone School Program, which provides schools with free materials, training, and other resources to make policy and environmental changes that support healthful eating and physical activity. An important way PANA encourages the sustainability of these changes is by helping schools develop individualized plans to make improvements through school health councils made up of educators, administrators, parents, students, and community members. Schools also get “report cards” from PANA that show them how their efforts compare to other participating schools in their county and across the state.

More than 1,100 schools enrolled in PANA's Keystone Healthy Zone School Program in 2005, up from 900 the year before. Many of these schools have instituted food and beverage policies, and have explored ways to make physical activity safer and more accessible.

Results

In only its second year, the Keystone Healthy Zone School Program showed considerable reach and promising results. In the spring of 2005, 1,133 schools from 66 counties – representing 65% of the state's school districts – enrolled in the program, up from slightly more than 900 the previous year (a 24% increase). A PANA survey of data from the first two years of the program showed there was also a nearly 85% increase in the number of schools with health councils, a 35% increase in the number of schools reporting a food and beverage policy, and almost a 50% increase in the number of schools addressing barriers to walking or biking to school.



At a KHZ school in Fayette County, students sing a song about eating well and being active. (Photo courtesy of the Penn State Cooperative Extension)



*Students at Fleetwood Elementary take part in Walk to School Day.
(Photo courtesy of PANA)*

Keystone schools used PANA resources to engage in a variety of efforts to encourage nutrition and physical activity. Of the 100 schools that each applied for and received a \$2,000 mini-grant in 2004, 100% created school health councils and made environmental improvements affecting nutrition, while almost half made environmental improvements affecting physical education. These efforts included nutrition education, student-produced nutrition commercials and campaigns, walking trails, walking and biking clubs, and fitness and health fairs. Participating schools are receiving growing support from the community for these and

other efforts – a positive step toward long-term program sustainability and individual behavior change. School districts have actively sought to collaborate on their Keystone efforts with YMCAs, health clubs, hospitals, sporting good stores, restaurants, grocery stores, orchards and farms, and others potential community partners.

What Else is Pennsylvania Doing to Address Overweight and Obesity?

- Developed the Keystone Color Me Healthy program for preschool-age children, a collaboration between the state Department of Education and PANA that aims to offer age-appropriate educational curriculum to child care centers, Family Literacy sites, and Head Start programs throughout the state, showing children, parents, teachers, and caregivers the importance of healthful eating and physical activity.
- Developed a state School Growth Screening Program to help determine if school-age children are underweight, normal weight, at risk of overweight, or overweight.

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